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AUTHOR Fowler, Shelli B.
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ABSTRACT

This paper tells the story of a pedagogy conference keynote event that is both specific and individual as well as emblematic of the difficulties that individuals face as academics and teachers. The paper explores the problematic relationship between power and responsibility, between privilege and accountability--issues that teachers are always wrestling with in their classrooms, in their scholarship, and in their daily lives. The paper's background is the 1997 "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Conference in Omaha, Nebraska, which a large and diverse group of academics, community activists, graduate and undergraduate student activists, and theater activists from across the nation attended. According to the paper, at one of the mass dialogue events the keynote speaker "lectured" the attendees about the usefulness of dialogue and about how to do a mass dialogue, while referring to the "keynote lecture format" as an academic "press conference," thereby agitating much of the 400-member audience. Afterward, the paper states, the speaker called on some people for questions and comments and ignored others, thus directing and controlling the dialogue--what was supposed to be a mass dialogue, an interactive, dialogic, and democratic event, turned into an anti-democratic, authoritarian exercise in containing, and ultimately silencing the angry voices of the diverse (and mainly marginalized) audience members. The paper suggests that all who consider themselves progressive educators can learn from this story; academics should be self-reflexive to continually engage in the critical analysis of personal inconsistencies and to change personal actions. (NKA)

Shelli B. Fowler
Associate Professor
Departments of English and Comparative American Cultures
Washington State University
Pullman, WA 99164-5020

"Mass Dialogue" Turned Mass Requiem: A "Democratic" Discourse Reconsidered

> What is ethically required of progressive educators is that, consistent with their democratic dream, they respect the [students], and therefore never manipulate them . . . . Hence the watchfulness with which progressive educators ought to act, the vigilance with which they ought to live their intense educational practice.
> -- Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*

It is difficult for most of us, who imagine ourselves as or name ourselves progressive educators, to vigilantly live, our "intense educational practice[s]." Too often there is a troubling discrepancy between our theory and our praxis, between our own published works--works that define a radical or progressive practice--and our own far-from-progressive practices in the public spaces of classrooms and conferences. Our inability to "walk the walk" after repeatedly "talking the talk" of radical pedagogical practice in publication after presentation after publication is the subject I'd like to focus on this morning. Within the 4Cs conference theme of "Breaking with Precedent," this paper will tell the story of a pedagogy conference keynote event that is both specific and

individual as well as emblematic of the difficulties we all face as academics and as teachers. It is not the kind of story that makes us comfortable, and it is not the kind of story we are encouraged to tell, unless there is a happy ending. It is a story that attempts to explore the problematic relationship between power and responsibility, between privilege and accountability--issues that each of us should be always already wrestling with in our classrooms, in our scholarship, in our daily lives inside and outside of the academy.

One year ago this month, at the 1997 "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" Conference in Omaha, Nebraska, a large and diverse group of academics, community activists, graduate and undergraduate student activists, and theatre activists from across the nation reconvened at the Peter Kiewit Conference Center in Omaha. Many had attended the conference the previous year, and had had the opportunity to hear Paulo Freire in one of his last U.S. appearances, as well as keynote speakers Augusto Boal, Peter McLaren and Lisa Albrecht. For those of us who had been there the previous year in '96, the April '97 gathering provided an opportunity to reconnect with colleagues, meet new colleagues, and perhaps most important, to continue the (very often tense and sometimes even contentious) conversations about what constitutes liberatory pedagogical practice.

The '96 conference had been an engaging and stimulating event. The atmosphere was charged as activists spoke with one another across / between/ and within the boundaries and borders of racialized, gendered, classed, sexualized, physical and professional identities. Academics who did not define themselves as activists were asked why not; academic activists argued with community activists about language usage, theory, and praxis; student activists spoke up about hierarchies of power. This description

may seem less than "engaging and stimulating" to some, but it was, from my perspective, exactly the kind of impassioned intellectual engagement that is very often lacking at our professional conferences. Real (rather than faux) debate and dialogue across differences occurred in panel sessions, in the hallways, and at the luncheons. While there was an inevitable tension among such a diverse collection of conference participants--a tension that resulted from not everyone being on the same page, so to speak, it was a useful tension, the kind that creates moments of un-comfortableness. It is those un-comfortable moments that produce spaces for critically engaged self-reflexive analysis of our own positionality, our own words, our own actions.

The tension that results from critically engaged dialogue provides teachable moments for all of us. There were, of course, conference participants who would rather that we had all simply and politely agreed to disagree, and the conference organizers were, I think, troubled by the lively debates among individuals and across discursive communities. The organizers invited Ira Shor and Augusto Boal to facilitate a "Mass Dialogue" for the 1997 conference, presumably to address, in large part, the contentious issues that had arisen during the '96 conference.

The keynote speakers for the '97 conference, then, included Augusto Boal, Geneva Smitherman, and Ira Shor. Smitherman's keynote address was held on Friday, from 4:00-5:30 p.m. After a dinner break, Shor and Boal were slated to run the mass dialogue from 7:00-9:00 p.m. Many of the discussion panels held throughout the day on Thursday and Friday, much like the previous year, discussed a wide range of compelling issues, including "Adapting Freire to the U.S. Community College--Service Learning,

Community Development, and Academic Study," "Show Me the Money: Raising Funds to Attend Conferences Like This One," "'They Think We're All Hoodlums': Accommodation and Resistance in Vocational Student Culture," "Where is the Body in Education Practices and Politics?" "Disability as Praxis," "Questioning Technology: Who Speaks in the Techno-Classroom?" "Homophobia in the Classroom," "Prison Caucus," and "On the Nature of Systems, Economic Class, and Discursive Practices." The '97 conference had an even larger number of community activists of color, as well as graduate and undergraduate students of color, and once again, the panel sessions and hallways were the site of impassioned discussion and debate about identity politics and the politics of location, about issues of power and privilege, about issues of having voice and of being silenced.

By the time some 400 audience members were gathered in the auditorium for the mass dialogue, energy levels and expectations for critical engagement with complex issues were high. What occurred next, however, was as baffling as it was distressing. Augusto Boal did not join Ira Shor for the mass dialogue event, and rather than simply initiate and facilitate a dialogue, Shor spent the first 35 minutes "lecturing" about the usefulness of dialogue, about how to do a mass dialogue, and about the non-usefulness and posturing of the "keynote lecture format," which he referred to as an academic "press conference." Whatever Shor's intentions, he began by effectively agitating much of the audience, many of whom heard his opening remarks as indirectly disrespecting (as one of the student activists later called it) the evening's first keynote speaker, Geneva Smitherman. Perhaps such a critique would have been beneficial, if Smitherman had not engaged with the

conference issues or the audience, but she had done just that. Smitherman talked about language and power, about the need for an informed pedagogy for literacy educators, one that helped students "interrogate the socio-historical situatedness of language and power," one that would "promote multi-lingualism in this country for everybody, not just for the people on the linguistic margins." And in discussing race, class, and language, Smitherman engaged the audience on issues of unequal distributions of cultural power saying that "[a] language is a dialect with an army and a navy" (Smitherman, keynote lecture). In other words, Smitherman raised issues very pertinent to the conference discussions, and she did so by speaking with, rather than at, the audience. Why Shor, who was in the audience for Smitherman's talk, apparently saw it as an academic press conference, confused and irritated many audience members, and may have contributed to the mass dialogue turned mass requiem for interactive discussion which followed.

After his 35 (plus) minutes of introductory remarks, and directions for how a mass dialogue should work, Shor asked each of us to write down and discuss with the person sitting next to us one or two key issues about the conference format and/or content. The auditorium began to hum with discussion. After 10 or 15 minutes, Shor asked us to reconvene as a whole, and he began to call on individuals who wanted to speak. The comments covered a range of concerns, but very quickly the comments began to focus on issues of power and representation, of privilege and voice, within the conference. As the comments continued, the amount of passionate involvement with the issues increased. This is not, remember, solely a conference of academics, and there was, then, no guarantee of proper academic behavior, of following the rules of academic decorum. The

impassioned commentary and critique from the audience was fine, except that the dialogue initiator, Ira Shor, seemed not to have expected emotionally charged dialogue. Initially, he was quiet, pointing at the raised hand of one speaker after another, and perhaps he was gathering information, preparing to "back-load" his summations and suggestions, but when he answered an African American woman, who commented that the committee that plans this conference did not have enough diverse racial representation, by suggesting that she volunteer to serve on the committee, he became a participant in the dialogue. Responses to that suggestion were then directed at Shor. Audience members reminded him that an awareness of race and gender inequities should not be the responsibility of a woman of color, and that she should not have to "fix" the problem by joining the committee. As emotions escalated, Shor continued to direct and control the dialogue by calling on individuals, and by not calling on other individuals, and by refusing to respond when he was addressed directly. The frustration at the efforts to control and contain the democratic process, and at Shor's passive silence and refusal to engage, continued to mount until a collective of students of color from the east coast, who were not being allowed to participate further in the dialogue (after two individual students had spoken out--and out loud--about the power issues governing not just the conference, but the mass dialogue event itself), stormed out in defiant outrage. Soon the auditorium began emptying, loudly, as activists and academics of color renounced this effort to silence their voices in what they understood to be a dialogue of the masses, and walked out.

What was, theoretically, supposed to be a mass dialogue--an interactive, dialogic, and democratic event--turned into an anti-democratic, authoritarian exercise in controlling

and containing, and ultimately silencing, the angry voices of the diverse (and mainly marginalized) mass of academics, community activists, and students present. Had a community activist with direct experience in community organizing facilitated the dialogue, or if Shor had passed the microphone on and relinquished control of the dialogue midway through the event, perhaps a heated and contentious, but productive, dialogue might have occurred. There was interest in generating strategies for revising the structure of the conference to help build bridges between the diverse constituencies. As it turned out, however, the mass dialogue ended up building a larger divide between the academic and non-academic communities. There was a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop the following evening to process the anger and frustration that had been generated during the mass dialogue, but most of the community and student activists did not attend. Most expressed their unwillingness to continue trying to build coalitions for social change in academic arenas that devalued and attempted to silence them. All of the individuals I spoke to said they would not attend the Pedagogy of the Oppressed conference again.

When a progressive educator is unable to participate in effective coalition building, or participate in the creation of a radically democratic practice, there is a dis-connect between theory and praxis. When a progressive educator intentionally or unintentionally participates in the anti-democratic dissolution of potential coalition building across diverse communities, we need to critically reflect on the process and work toward resolving the disjunction between word and action. A progressive educator must walk the very talk he espouses, or be quiet and get out of the way. Whether we're keynoters at conferences or

teachers in writing classrooms, all of us who think of ourselves as progressive educators can learn from this story.

I mentioned earlier the relationship between power and responsibility and privilege and accountability, and by that I mean to suggest that the more power and privilege we have, the greater our responsibility to affect change, and the more likely we are to be held accountable for our actions. As academics, we tend to downplay the power and privilege we have in certain arenas, including the classroom. We also tend to attach significant value to our written work in the academy, as the prestige and power of publications are what tend to garner tenure and promotion, and even, in some cases, academic stardom.

For those who work outside of the academy, in particular, the dis-connect between the published work and the public work is baffling and extremely troubling. This was summed up rather succinctly by a conference participant and community activist from Boston, whose political work is done outside of academe. He told me that after the "mass dialogue mess" (as he called it) that he was disillusioned about what kind of change-agent the institution of higher education really was or could be, if silencing dissonance was the goal of those who work in the area of critical pedagogy.

It should be troubling to all of us who work within the halls and walls of higher education when we fall short of the work we write about and believe we are practicing. How do we resolve the discrepancy between a progressive educator whose work is firmly grounded in Freirean pedagogy, who nearly 20 years ago, reminded us in *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* that "dialogue is a democratic model of social relations, used to problematize the undemocratic quality of social life," and who agrees with Freire that

"dialogue [is] a critical and criticism-stimulating activity . . ." (95), but who in fact fostered vertical anti-dialogue as an oppressive pedagogy, rather than horizontal dialogue as a liberating one (Freire, qtd. on 95) in a keynote conference event? It is very discomforting to know that "when students have power" and when we are learning to "negotiate authority in a critical pedagogy," as Shor tells us 16 years later, that "in twenty years of classroom research and writing, [Shor] had never reflected so hard in-progress on [his] teaching, and that "in [his] own development as a critical teacher, [he] crossed a certain threshold of democratic practice" with the After-Class Group of the Utopia course at CSI in the early 1990s (*When Students Have Power*, 1996,126). Apparently, however, that same reflection and previous experience does not inform his work in what he calls the "public forums [that] are structured like classrooms" (23) in a 1997 conference.

While I have focused here on the specific actions of a well-known progressive educator, in doing so I want to focus attention on our own political work in our own arenas. Freire repeatedly said that consistency of word and action is crucial, that the "virtues or qualities on the part of intellectuals [is] that their words and their actions should coincide as closely as possible. . . ." There should be "a reasonable level of consistency between what they say and what they do" (*Learning to Question* 55). Freire argued that "[i]n our assessment of the sometimes blatant contradiction between the way in which intellectuals express their vision of the future in words and their action to achieve it, what counts most is their action and not their words" (55). Our praxis to create change, inside and outside of the classroom, must be consistent with our theorizing about the process of change. The story of a Mass Dialogue turned Mass Requiem for its

participants is one that urges all of us to be self-reflexive, to continually engage in the ongoing critical analysis of our own inconsistencies as progressive educators, to recognize the inconsistencies and to change our actions.

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